

Hamlet from the Perspective of Holy Quran, Hadith, and Buddhism's Dukkha: An Analytical Study of Language Learning Process

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Abstract: *The prime objective of this study is to find traces of the Quran, Hadith, and Buddhism in Shakespeare's Hamlet, an eponymous play. Certain critics term it a religious allegory or religious play, but all of them have commented in a sweeping manner. The paper has investigated what elements of these two different religions are found in the play. The paper referred to certain relevant segments of Quranic verses and Hadith. But the references to Buddhism and Buddha will be in a general manner. The soliloquies, asides, and dialogues of Hamlet with different characters especially of Gertrude shall be taken into account. The main focus shall be on the relevant Holy Quranic verses whose deeper meaning and superficial meanings find a touch in the witty but obtuse dialogues of Hamlet. The paper will further undertake the study of whether Shakespeare has ever studied the religious books: The Tripitaka, the Holy Quran, and Hadith.*

Key Words: The Holy Quran, Hadith, Tripitaka, Hamlet, Soliloquies

Introduction

To study all the prevalent and practiced world religions is a Herculean task, and in addition to that several of these religions are also based on conjectures and surmises. But one thing is common in the widely practised religions – they pose the question about one's identity, where he is from, and why he is in this world. So, in the same way, the first dialogue of Shakespeare's eponymous play Hamlet has the same question when Barnardo says to Francisco: "Who is there?"

"Who is there" is the ultimate question of every spiritual religion seeks to reply. It is also the basic question which Hindu

philosophers and Buddhists pose to the followers of their religion. An Indian religious figure from Tamil Nadu, Sri Ramana Mashari, posed the question: "Nan Yar" which can be translated as (Who am I). He proselytized "self-inquiry" to jettison ignorance and to create awareness among his devotees who visited him to have his *Darshan* and regarded him as an *Avatar of Shiva*.

The very first question (*Who is there?*) in "Hamlet", a magnum opus of Shakespeare has not been so critically investigated and analyzed as it was done to the question posed by the Buddhist religion two thousand five hundred years ago. Shakespeare's versatility

as a scintillating writer who overshadowed and outshined his contemporary writers rests on such philosophical and religious ideas that he floated for the readers and the audience alike.

As we know William Shakespeare was an actor (player); and when he performed a role in Ben Jonson's play, *Sejanus*, that performance was met with critique, booing, and derisions from the audience so Shakespeare left performing on stage and started writing plays and these plays brought popularity for him. Shakespeare was endowed with a gifted mind and he knew the teachings of different religions which talk about ephemeral and eternal sufferings – *Dukkha* as the Buddhist religion has put it – of man (Sutta 1995).

Language Learning and Communication Skills in Hamlet

The protagonist, Hamlet, grapples with the power of language and its capacity to shape perceptions and realities. His famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be," highlights his contemplation of existence and the choices words offer in expressing his internal turmoil. This introspective exploration mirrors the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, emphasizing the role of introspection and self-expression.

Moreover, Polonius' advice to his son Laertes (Give thy thoughts no tongue) underscores the importance of thoughtful communication, reflecting the cognitive aspect of language learning where reflection and discretion play a crucial role in linguistic development.

Rhetoric and Persuasion

The play also showcases the art of rhetoric through characters like Claudius and Hamlet himself. Claudius's persuasive abilities serve as a case study in manipulating language for personal gain, illustrating how language can be used as a tool of influence and persuasion.

Hamlet's adept use of language, seen in his clever wordplay and strategic manipulation during the play within a play, underscores the importance of linguistic agility in effective communication.

Psychological Dimensions of Language Learning

Hamlet's internal conflict and indecision present a psychological dimension akin to the challenges learners face in mastering a new language. His wavering thoughts and emotions, often expressed through monologues, mirror the cognitive dissonance experienced in the language learning process. This psychological struggle resonates with the complexities learners encounter when navigating linguistic and cultural nuances.

Paradigms of Language Learning from Hamlet

1. **Language Proficiency:** The play exposes learners to sophisticated language, varied vocabulary, and complex sentence structures. Studying and understanding these elements can enhance language proficiency and comprehension.
2. **Cultural Context:** Exploring "Hamlet" allows learners to delve into Elizabethan English and culture, providing historical context and expanding their cultural awareness.
3. **Linguistic Analysis:** Analyzing dialogues and monologues aids in understanding rhetorical devices, wordplay, metaphors, and idiomatic expressions, promoting deeper linguistic analysis and interpretation skills.
4. **Character Dialogue:** Assigning roles and acting out scenes encourages oral proficiency, pronunciation, intonation, and expression, enabling learners to embody the characters and their language use.

5. Writing Exercises: Writing essays or creative pieces in response to the play nurtures writing skills, encouraging learners to articulate thoughts coherently and persuasively.
6. Debate and Discussion: Encouraging debates on themes, character motivations, or ethical dilemmas in the play fosters critical thinking, communication skills, and the ability to express opinions.
7. Literary Analysis: Studying "Hamlet" allows learners to analyze themes, character development, and plot intricacies, honing their analytical and interpretative skills.
8. Comparative Studies: Comparing different adaptations, interpretations, or translations of "Hamlet" across languages exposes learners to diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives.
9. Supplementary Materials: Pairing the play with simplified versions, modern translations, or multimedia resources aids comprehension and accommodates different proficiency levels.
10. Creative Projects: Engaging in creative projects like writing alternative endings, composing soliloquies, or adapting scenes into different formats fosters imagination, creativity, and language usage.

Discussion

If we trace down the history of theatre or stage, we cannot but conclude that stage is a veritable metaphor of human incarnate and human activities in this world. Ram Daas, an American spiritual leader and religious teacher, has said that spiritual work is just to *"understand that you are a soul passing through a life in which the entire drama is a script for your awakening and that you are more than just the drama."* (Dass 2014). That is what Shakespeare has said in his play, *As You Like It*, that this world is a stage, and all

human beings whether men or women or just players, are destined to play the part which is assigned to them. The role which they play on the stage varies according to the situation, age and capability. After playing their part they are "heard no more."

If we juxtapose the sayings of Buddha and Shakespeare, we find certain similarities especially as far as Buddha's *Dukkha* is concerned. Hamlet's play is fraught with the sufferings (*Dukkha*) of Ophelia, Hamlet and the gravediggers. The *Dukkha* of Hamlet and Ophelia come to an end with their death. One of the themes which Hamlet surfaces is one of the three major marks of human existence i.e. *Dukkha* or suffering which is an inescapable and inalienable truth.

The following soliloquy of Hamlet reflects the same thought as pinpointed by *Buddha*:

"What a piece of worke is a man! How Noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In forme and mouing how expresse and admirable! In Action, how like an Angel in apprehension, how like a God!

The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Man delights not me—nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so."

Shakespeare has delineated a character who is insane but that was real madness or feigned madness is a matter of debate and conjectures. The prince of Denmark, Hamlet, is visited by his father's apparition and the ghost tells him that Late Hamlet was slain by his uncle, King Claudius. Hamlet vows to take revenge against his father's murder and puts "an antic disposition on" he further determines that he will take that course of action which is more useful and he also wants to make sure that Claudius is the killer. Hamlet's tarried inaction is his hamartia, but as he procrastinates towards his goal, the other characters get the time to devise their

own stratagems to debunk Hamlet's "distemper": the murder of King Hamlet, a hasty marriage of widowed queen, Hamlet's passionate love for Ophelia and repudiation of advances made by Hamlet. Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet, and Claudius, the uncle of Hamlet, summon the pals of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to Elsinore, so they can ferret out the true nature and source of Hamlet's erratic and uncanny behaviour (Gilbert 1892). The queen and Claudius intended that these friends of Hamlet can ferret out the reason for Hamlet's melancholy by cheering him on.

When the friends of Hamlet arrive at the court he feels initially rhapsody, but he does not take a long time to know the reason for his friends' arrival. When Hamlet asks his friends about the reason for their arrival they subterfuge his question, but he knows the reason. Then Hamlet starts a grandiloquent speech which confirms to his friends that he is nothing more than what they already knew that he is sad. Hamlet says: *"This majestic roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."* Elsinore has become a place where duplicity, sycophancy and hypocrisy are ruling, the people have become pawns and Hamlet's friends are also one of those pawns.

Research Questions

This study addressed, the following research questions:

1. What are the similarities between Hamlet, Quran, and Buddhism?
2. Whether these similarities are willful or just through a quirk of chance?
3. Whether Shakespeare studied these two religions or not?
4. What are the lessons in the language learning process behind the perspectives of the study?

Analysis of the Text of Hamlet

Gautum Buddha whose original name was Siddharth was a religious leader who lived during the 6th BCE in South Asia and his followers can be found primarily in Nepal, Bhutan India, and many other parts of the world. He presented a path to Nirvana, freedom, and Dukkha (suffering). Four Nobel Truths are associated with Buddha and one of them is the overcoming of *Dukkha* which is caused by ignorance and desire. (James 2016). He is widely revered and eulogized by his followers, he showed the way of Nirvana and liberty from suffering and ignorance. He was born in Nepal and led a life of asceticism and begging; he meditated a lot about the existence of man.

Humankind is a bizarre and uncanny creation of God, difficult to fathom out; boundless in understanding and his power of thought and phenomenal in form. It is also and the only *"Quintessence of Dust"* (Krishan 1997). Quintessence means the 5th essence or matter of which the planets and stars were made. It is widely believed that the other four elements or matters which are present on earth i.e. water, air, fire and earth are corruptible and are subject to decay but on the other hand, the 5th element quintessence is unperishable, incontrovertible and incorruptible. But if we analyze Hamlet's *"Quintessence of Dust"* we get some paradoxical and contradictory views. Hamlet takes it as *"foul and pestilent"* which is engulfing and shrouding Hamlet's mind. He is unable to perceive heaven through this Quintessence (Carol 2013).

When we think about the Dukkha of Buddhism, we find ourselves in a quandary. Hamlet has put it that way: *"The time is out of joint; O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!"* As we know one of the sutras of Buddha was Dukkha, and Dukkha has three categories. The first category is to go through such pain which is unenviable; the second category is the Dukkha of gratifying

experience when we realize that the pleasure is ephemeral and fleeting it causes us deep distress which sometimes gets unbearable, and the third category is the Dukkha of "conditioner experience" it is the unsatisfactoriness which is prevailing everywhere (Karen 2004), The third category is also called *Sankhara Dukkha* in Sanskrit.

For certain religious figures, *Sankhara Dukkha* has its roots in transitoriness – a sense that everything is going to end and is going to reduce to dust. It further suggests that everything is dust, a puppet, and something substanceless. The paradox of *Sankhara Dukkha* is that one is not aware of his existence (Kelsang 1995). Hamlet underscores this point that Man's 'Faculty', 'Form' and these are inextricable and miraculous.

Hamlet's world is fraught with a mist of *Sankhara Dukkha* – it is the perception of Hamlet that there is a smell of rat in the affairs of Denmark – although none of the other characters get an inkling about the rottenness brewing in the palace of Denmark. The Buddhist preachers might suggest that it is the 'vapour' which hampers Hamlet from seeing humankind in a more disarrayed way than he expresses in his dialogues. Rangjung Dorje was a Tibetan master who lived during the fourteenth century (Willard 1982). He wrote a book: "Treatise on Buddha Nature". In the book, he wrote that everyone is Buddha, but these qualities are mystified, and when that obscurity is removed, there would be only Buddhahood (Rod 1984).

Umer Khayyam, a popular Persian poet, astronomer and mathematician, has written quatrains (Rubayat) extensively; and his quatrains are exquisitely translated by Edward Fitzgerald. Khayyam's works have been widely admired and widely translated into different languages. Several British and American writers have used his poetic lines as titles for their plays and novels. Eugene O Neil drew the title of his play, *Oh, Wilderness!* from the quatrain of Khayyam.

Agatha Christie used the famous phrase of Khayyam "The Moving Finger" as the title of her story. Sean O Casey, the Irish writer, has also used quotes from Khayyam in his plays.

His quatrains find a link to the verses of the Holy Quran and talk about the ephemeral nature of humans. The following quatrain of Umer Khayyam reflects the transitoriness of human life as Hamlet reflects:

"The Worldly Hope men
Set their Hearts upon Turns
Ashes - or it prospers; and
Anon, Like Snow upon the
Desert's dusty Face, Lighting
A little hour or two - is gone."

If we talk about the Quintessence of Dust from the Quranic perspective it is just that dust from whom Adam was created by Allah and by extension a drop of semen from which humankind gets its progeny. The Qur'an describes how Allah created Adam, and then Allah infused the spirit into Adam:

الْوَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَالٍ مِنْ حَبَا مَسْنُونٍ

"We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape..." (15:26). The Quran further says:

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِنْ طِينٍ
ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ مَاءٍ مَهِينٍ

"He (Allah) began the creation of man from clay and made his progeny from a quintessence of fluid" (32:7-8).

So, human beings have a close attachment with the earth, we are buried in the earth after the demise. In the Holy Quran, Allah further states that O' Man you will live on this earth, you will die on this earth and you will be raised here on the Day of Judgment. So, earth is part and parcel of human beings, it is something that is inescapable and which is a must for human survival.

In the Surah, *Ar-Rum*, which is the 30th Surah of the Holy Quran, the prowess and magnificence of the Roman Empire are mentioned. That Surah refers to the Byzantine and Persian war which was waged during 602 – 622, and that war was ultimately won by the Roman Kingdom by blatantly routing the Persian Empire. This Surah refers to a gloomy prognosis in the form of loss for Persia.

عَلَبَتِ الرُّومُ
فِي أَدْنَى الْأَرْضِ وَهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ عَلَيْهِمْ سَبْعُونَ
فِي يَضَعِ سِينِينَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ الْأَمْرُ مِنْ قَبْلِ وَهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ وَيَوْمَئِذٍ يَقُولُ
الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

“The Romans have been crushed.

In the nearer land (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine), and they, after their defeat, will be victorious.”

Within three to nine years. The decision of the matter, before and after (these events) is only with Allah, (before the defeat of Romans by Persians, and after, i.e., the defeat of the Persians by the Romans). And on that Day, the believers (Muslims) will rejoice (at the victory given by Allah to the Romans against the Persians).”

Now coming to the speech of Horatio, the friend of Hamlet, in which he has referred to Rome as something splendid.

“A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,” Horatio

William Shakespeare's other illustrious drama, *Julius Caesar*, also talks about Rome in an elaborate and sensational manner. The following speech of Marc Antony is witness to that when he says:

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

The Holy Quran talks about the Roman

Empire and its victory against Persia but in *Hamlet*, Horatio talks about only Rome's magnificence; and refers to its king.

The Holy Prophet, Muhammad (SAW), the founder of Islam as a religion has said:

من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه.

“Who knows his self knows his Lord”.

The play, *Hamlet*, starts with the question put to Francisco by Barnardo: “Who's there?”. There is a pun in the question, in a literal way, it means that who has come here or who is here. But its underlying meaning is self-introspection. If you look inside yourself at what you are and why you are in this world, once it is unravelled to you then you can understand yourself in a better way. But the Holy Prophet Muhammad's sayings also say that after recognizing yourself, you will recognize Allah. Socrates has also maintained that to “Know yourself” is the crux of all philosophical knowledge. Albeit, it is an old and somewhat platitudinous adage - “Know thyself,” - but it still holds its water. Aristotle also reiterated in another way but having the same meaning: “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom”.

We can also find a reference in the Holy Quran to the transitoriness of the world and human life which is nothing but a bubble. The Holy Quran says:

إِعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُمْ وَرِثَةٌ تَفْآخُرُ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ
فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ

“Know that the life of the world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry, and boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children.”

Hamlet also points out the same idea as presented in the Holy Quran that one man's pursuits and achievements are nothing. In the graveyard where the grave of Ophelia is being dug, he addresses different graves in which different people who practised

different professions are lying.

“There’s another, Why, may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?”

The Holy Quran further says while addressing the believers (Momins) that one must fear Allah and always utter the statements in the right way without prevarication.

﴿ ٧٠ أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَقُولُوا قَوْلًا سَدِيدًا

“Those who believe in Allah, fear Allah and say in a straight manner without any prevarication.

While Hamlet is in the cemetery and the sexton is digging a grave, Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave this is the gravedigger does not reply in a clear way. Then Hamlet retorts the gravedigger in the following manner:

“How absolute the knave is. We must speak by the card or equivocation.”

Hamlet is struggling in ferreting out the truth from the gravedigger so he responds to the gravedigger that he should not equivocate when he is questioned. Hamlet is looking for an unequivocal reply from the gravedigger while looking at the graves of different people who are no more. Quran has beautifully emphasized this point, The Holy Quran even further maintains that if someone does not say his point of view or any other thing or talk in a straight way then his pious deeds are nothing, in addition to that it is also self-honoring for a man. Prevarication is also termed as a form of hypocrisy, those who are whited sepulchre also answer through this way.

In the play of Shakespeare, The Winter’s Tale, Leontes also uses the same language and equivocates. Polixenes is the king of Bohemia and he visits his old friend who is the king of Sicily. After staying for nine months, Polixenes intends to return to his motherland to handle the courtly matters.

When Leontes coaxes Polixenes to stay for a few more months Polixenes disagrees but on the request of Hermione, the wife of Leontes, Polixenes consents to stay more. This incident develops jealousy in Leontes and Leontes equivocates in the following way:

“Is this nothing?”

Why, then the world and all that isn't is nothing;

The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia is nothing;

My wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothings,

If this be nothing.”

The above expression of Leontes simply suggests how much he is equivocating and not talking in a candid manner. His wife fails to understand what Leontes is saying. This unenviable jealousy which is going to be a harbinger of a rift between two kings, turns out to be too deleterious. Although, in the end through Florizel (the son of Polixenes) and Perdita (the daughter of Leontes) they get united, and the controversy gets unraveled. This jealousy also reminds me of certain parables of the Holy Quran which talk about jealousy. In [Surah Yousaf](#) (Joseph), the Holy Quran spins the most beautiful yarn of all parables. The Holy Quran states that when the brothers of Hazrat Yousaf realized that their father had developed more proclivity towards Yousaf they got jealous and hatched a plan to throw Hazrat Yousaf into a well. And they executed their plan and threw Yousaf in the well but Allah saved him and he was sold in Egypt.

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ بِمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ وَإِن

كُنْتَ مِن قَبْلِهِ لَمِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

We are going to spin the most amazing parable to you through Revelation of this

Quran, You were not aware of that before that.

One of the soliloquies of Hamlet spells out the transitoriness of life, when someone is disgruntled and facing a barrage of sufferings and sorrows he finds nothing rather a murky state of affairs everywhere. Hamlet says:

“O God! O God

How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world;

Fie on t, ah fie, ‘tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed”

Once the Holy Prophet Muhammad drew a rectangle on the earth with his own hand and then drew a line between that rectangle shape, the line in the middle of that rectangle was spangled with small lines. The Holy Prophet told his Holy Companions that the line in the middle of the rectangle is the life of man and the boundary or fence of that rectangle is the death of man. The small lines on the middle line of the rectangle are the sorrows, troubles, predicaments and hindrances which are so many. If a man is able to cross the first small line, then a new line will crop up so this dilemma will continue intermittently but unabatedly. We can compare and draw an analogy with the dialogue of King Claudius

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies

But in battalions.”

The life is awash with miseries and sorrows, Thomas Hardy has rightly said that happiness is just an episode in the general drama of unending pain.

Conclusion

Shakespeare produced Hamlet with acute observation and assiduity of mind, Since Shakespeare was a versatile genius, he might have read a few excerpts from the Holy

Quran and the books about Buddhism. The Holy Quran is miraculous because of its deep insight, its message of morality, its message of the right path, and the message about social structure and how to be a good rather than perfect human being. The Holy Quran says in Ayat No. 32, Surah Al-Maidah:

مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَلِكَ كَتَبْنَا عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنَّهُ مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَلَقَدْ جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فِي الْأَرْضِ لَمُسْرِفُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

“On account of this. We wrote for the children of Israel that whosoever killed a soul not to retaliate for a soul, nor for creating disorder in the land, then it is as if he had killed the entire mankind. And whosoever gave life to one soul, then it is as if he had given life to the entire mankind. And undoubtedly, Our Messengers came to them with clear proofs then undoubtedly, many of them after that commit excess in the land.”

The murder of the late King Hamlet was the slaying of not one man but it was just the ruthless murder of the entire humanity, that's why Prince Hamlet vows to avenge his father's murder. However, he procrastinates in murder because of over scrupulous mind. Hamlet knows that his father's murder has created panic among the denizens of Denmark, in addition to that the Ghost of his late father has also entrusted him with the enterprise of killing Claudius (Michael 1987).

We have also found certain traces of Hadith in the soliloquies of Hamlet, Claudius, and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Although, Hamlet play is a chronological or historical play that is awash with philosophical dialogues of its protagonist, Prince Hamlet. But its deeper and critical study shows that it is a religious play having touches from the Holy Quran, Hadith, and Buddhist doctrines.

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